

A Video Artist Mines the Sweet Drone of Suffering

By Michael Joseph Gross

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LOS ANGELES, Dec. 3 - Cameron Jamie suffers for his art. For his short film "BB" (2000), he spent the better part of two years shooting backyard wrestlers in the San Fernando Valley. And the young wrestlers shot back.

Earlier this week, over a slice of apple pie at a family restaurant here, Mr. Jamie recalled: "They threw bricks at me. And ladders. You're just there filming, and kids do stupid things." For example, they jump off rooftops.

"The worst is when they land on you," he said, evenly.

"BB" has been screened in the United States, but it will be shown with a live score by the Melvins, a metal punk band, for the first time here on Saturday night at Royce Hall at the University of California, Los Angeles. (The program, which also features two of Mr. Jamie's other shorts, is not yet scheduled elsewhere in the country.)

Among contemporary video art fans, "BB" has a bit of a cult following. In Art Forum, Gary Indiana wrote that the film's "complex choreography of injury" has "the visceral effect of a classical drama."

Its prescient foreshadowing of the "Jackass"-style stunt fad briefly made Mr. Jamie, 35, a Valley native who lives in Paris, a hot prospect with Hollywood studio executives. ("They wanted me to sign a contract that whatever I gave them they could change, make it more palatable to audiences," he said. "I said no way.")

Accompanied by the Melvins, "BB" has played to packed houses in Europe about 20 times in the last three years. Mr. Jamie, who described the score as "rock music of monolithic, Wagnerian proportions," no longer allows the film to be shown unless the band performs with it.

The other films to be screened Saturday are "Spook House" (2003), about Halloween in the Detroit suburbs, and "Kranky Klaus" (2003), which explores an Austrian Christmas custom with a satanic edge. "Every year on Dec. 5 and 6, Santa Claus comes and delivers gifts to people's homes, and he's accompanied by this kind of devil, which is called the Krampus," Mr. Jamie said. "Whoever is good gets a gift, and whoever is bad gets beaten. This duality -- iconic figures of good and evil can work together -- fascinated me. Especially coming from America, this Puritan culture, where the Devil and Santa would never be seen in the same room."

These three films show Mr. Jamie's preoccupation with violent folk rituals of the working class. Shot with handheld super 8 and video cameras, they share a low-tech, *cinéma vérité* style. David Sefton, director of the U.C.L.A. live performance series, said: "There's a raw edge to all of this work, an interesting grittiness. It's the reality TV of the visual arts."

Mr. Jamie said his work was not influenced by contemporary pop culture. He never reads magazines, he said, and he dismissed reality shows as "fast food for the brain," saying he had not watched television since 1994.

Howard Fox, curator of contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, said: "For him to describe himself in such isolate terms is not surprising. It's very much about his art and how he goes about making his art."

Mr. Fox described a Jamie performance that, like "BB," entailed some risk: In 2000, Mr. Jamie rode a horse all night through residential neighborhoods in Northridge in the Valley. "There wasn't anybody documenting this," Mr. Fox said. "No assistants working with him. Just him on a horse. Anybody else who was out there at that time could have their way with him."

This is Mr. Jamie's first visit to California in a year. Entering the studio apartment he still keeps in Los Feliz, he said, was "like visiting someone else's tomb."

He frequently speaks of Los Angeles in bitter generalities: "There's no room for people like me here. L.A. is really closed-minded." Nevertheless, he prizes the chance to see friends like the Melvins.

Explaining the collaboration with Mr. Jamie, Buzz Osborne, the Melvins' lead singer, said: "One thing I am absolutely opposed to is anything like an MTV

video. I hate it. I hate that whole medium." Instead, he continued, the band wanted to make something, "a little more loose, a little less traditional."

"That was basically the rules," he added. "No rules."

When performing with Mr. Jamie's movies, the Melvins are onstage, beneath or behind the screen. Dale Crover sometimes leaves his drum set to run through the audience. He said he liked to "hold a cymbal over people's heads and beat it," during "Spook House." "Most people kind of like just ignored me."

Mr. Jamie spoke of his work with the Melvins in a tone of boyish wonder, several times describing the music as a "beautiful drone."

What's beautiful about a drone?

"The mystery of the drone," he said. "The drone is a continuous hum. And it's what you feel in the hum. And you either feel it or you don't. You know what I mean?"

It was the ninth time he had asked that question in an hour. He narrowed his shoulders, pulling the long sleeves of his shirt over his hands to cover himself more fully and asked, "Do you understand?"